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Options for reviewing and strengthening the mandate and status of the Commission on Human Settlements and the status, role and function of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat)

Report of the Secretary-General

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I. Introduction

1. At its twenty-fifth special session for an overall review and appraisal of the implementation of the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), the General Assembly, in resolution S-25/2 of 9 June 2001, adopted the Declaration on Cities and Other Human Settlements in the New Millennium, contained in the annex thereto. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 67 of the Declaration, in which the Secretary-General was invited to report to the Assembly, at its fifty-sixth session, on options for reviewing and strengthening the mandate and status of the Commission on Human Settlements and the status, role and function of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), in accordance with the relevant decisions of the Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and the Conference.[1]

II. Commission on Human Settlements

2. By its resolution 1978/1 of 12 January 1978, the Economic and Social Council established the Commission on Human Settlements to replace the Committee on Housing, Building and Planning. The United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) reviewed the mandate of the Commission and, as set forth in paragraph 222 of the Habitat agenda,[2] entrusted it with, inter alia, the following objectives, functions and responsibilities:

(a) To promote integrated and cohesive policies at all levels, aiming at achieving the goals of adequate shelter for all and sustainable human settlements development in all countries, with due regard to the carrying capacity of the environment, in accordance with the Habitat Agenda;

(b) To track progress in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda, inter alia, through the analysis of relevant inputs from Governments, local authorities and their associations, relevant non-governmental organizations and the private sector;

(c) To assist countries, particularly developing countries, subregions and regions, in increasing and improving their own efforts to solve shelter and human settlements problems, including through promotion of vocational training;

(d) To promote, for effective national follow-up plans and activities, greater international cooperation in order to increase the availability of resources to all developing countries, especially those in Africa and the least developed countries, and promote the effective contribution of the private sector and local authorities and their associations;

(e) To provide appropriate recommendations to the General Assembly through the Economic and Social Council on the basis of an analysis and synthesis of the information received and to inform the Commission on Sustainable Development;

(f) To facilitate cooperation and partnerships among all countries and regions to achieve the goals of adequate shelter for all and sustainable human settlements development;

(g) To continue to develop and promote policy objectives, priorities and guidelines regarding existing and planned programmes of work of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) in the fields of adequate shelter and sustainable human settlements development, in accordance with the Habitat Agenda;

(h) To track the progress of the activities of the United Nations system, to cooperate with other international organizations in the fields of adequate shelter and sustainable human settlements development and to propose, when appropriate, ways and means by which the overall policy objectives and goals in those fields within the United Nations system might best be achieved;

(i) To promote adequate shelter for all and sustainable human settlements development in harmony with the recommendations made by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, particularly chapter 7 of Agenda 21,[3] taking into account, as appropriate, the relevant outcomes of other major United Nations conferences and summits;

(j) To promote the full and effective implementation of the Habitat Agenda at the national and international levels;

(k) To study in the context of the Habitat Agenda new issues and problems with a view to developing solutions for adequate shelter for all and sustainable human settlements development, including those of a regional or international character;

(l) To continue to give overall policy guidance to and carry out supervision of the operations of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), including the United Nations Habitat and Human Settlements Foundation;

(m) To review and approve periodically the utilization of funds at its disposal for carrying out shelter and human settlements development activities at all levels;

(n) To monitor and evaluate the progress made towards and obstacles encountered in achieving the goals of the Habitat Agenda and recommend appropriate measures and alternative actions as deemed necessary to enhance the dynamic nature of the Habitat Agenda.

3. In the Declaration on Cities and Other Human Settlements in the New Millennium, the General Assembly reconfirmed the role of the Commission on Human Settlements and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) in advocating, promoting, monitoring and assessing progress made in implementing the goals of adequate shelter for all by providing legal security of tenure and sustainable human settlements development in all countries and in combining best practices, enabling policies, and compiling legislation and action plans for identifying illustrative cities for the two global campaigns and further advancing the normative debate and operational action on major human settlements issues, inter alia, by timely and regular publication of global flagship reports (para. 66).

4. Since 1978, the Commission has held 18 sessions. While sessions were held on an annual basis before 1991, the Commission has since initiated the practice of meeting on a biennial basis in odd years. The duration of sessions was also shortened, to be kept within five working days. Despite the short duration of sessions and their biennial scheduling, the Commission has been able to discharge a remarkable workload with the assistance of the secretariat. In addition, the Commission, in draft resolution 18/1 of 16 February 2001 included in the report of its 2001 session,[4] recommended to the Economic and Social Council the establishment of the Committee of Permanent Representatives as an inter-sessional subsidiary body of the Commission to further strengthen the interaction between Permanent Representatives in Nairobi and the secretariat during inter-sessional periods.

5. At its eighteenth session, the Commission also established through its resolution 18/5 of 16 February 2001[5] a new urban forum as a merger of the Urban Environment Forum and the International Forum on Urban Poverty. The first session of the Urban Forum is scheduled to be held in Nairobi in May 2002. The Forum is expected to be an open-ended gathering, placing strong emphasis on the participation of Habitat Agenda partners. Its main focus will be on eliminating overlaps and identifying synergies among development agencies in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. The Forum is expected to serve as an important complement to the work of the Commission.

6. Nine of the 18 sessions held so far by the Commission took place outside the Nairobi headquarters of the Centre at the invitation of a host country. On seven of these occasions, the host was a developing country. Those sessions were provided with a strong impulse with respect to undertaking national and international human settlements activities within the host country and the region. They also entailed no additional costs, as host countries covered the travel and subsistence costs of servicing staff from the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), as well as provided locally available supporting services. The proposed scheduling of a Commission session (in odd years) and of an Urban Forum session (in even years) in alternation would provide new opportunities for renewing this practice, without detracting from the frequency of international meetings in Nairobi. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has expressed its support for the creation of the biennial Urban Forum and stands ready to participate in its meetings.

7. There has been wide interest in the Commission's work as indicated by high participation in its meetings by member States and observers. Since it was established, in addition to the 58 members,[6] an average of 40 other member States and observers have been attending the Commission's meetings. Many members, according to a long-standing tradition of the Commission, participate at the Ministerial level. Taking into account the sustained interest in the Commission's work, the following opportunities for enhancing the Commission's policy-making role could be explored:

(a) Holding high-level policy dialogues about difficulties encountered, successes achieved, and opportunities for enhanced international cooperation in

translating the Habitat Agenda into national and local action;

(b) Inviting renowned technical and professional personalities to share their achievements and experiences with Commission members;

(c) Expanding the successful practice of high-level dialogues with major Habitat Agenda partner groups, established as a follow-up to Habitat II;

(d) Creating more structured opportunities during Commission sessions for the identification of international cooperation initiatives, programmes and projects with multilateral and bilateral partners;

(e) Instituting the practice of policy dialogues with the Chairs of other functional commissions at annual sessions of the Economic and Social Council to identify synergies and better coordinate the work programmes of the respective secretariats.

8. As the General Assembly did not define the status of the Commission within the Economic and Social Council when the Commission was established in 1978, it is considered to be a "standing committee" of the Council. The Assembly may wish to consider conferring on the Commission the status of a full-fledged functional commission of the Council.

9. By being placed alongside the nine functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council, the mandate of the Commission would not be altered but its status would be strengthened. Such a move would be consistent with the role of the Commission as part of a three-tiered intergovernmental structure for the follow-up of Habitat II, together with the Council and the General Assembly. It would be in line with the fact that the Council, in its work on the coordinated follow-up to conferences, has examined the work of the Commission together with the work of those of its functional commissions entrusted with the follow-up of other major conferences. In order to avoid any duplication with the Commission on Sustainable Development on issues such as energy, fresh water, sanitation, waste management and local Agenda 21, careful attention should be given to elaborating the terms of reference of the possible new functional commission. This option has some additional budgetary implications with regard to the payment of travel, but not subsistence expenses, for one representative of each member State participating in a functional commission of the Council.[7]

10. A second option could be to have the Commission function as an organ of the General Assembly, reporting through the Economic and Social Council. While there would be no additional statutory financial implications in terms of paid travel to delegations, one might not have the same benefit of facilitating interaction with other functional commissions in the harmonized preparation of respective work programmes and of providing a greater visibility of the human settlements sector in the context of the Council coordination machinery.

III. The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat)

11. The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) was established by the General Assembly in its resolution 32/162 (III) of 19 December 1977, and was to be headed by an Executive Director at the Under-Secretary-General level, responsible to the Secretary-General. Since its creation, the Centre's role has been steadily expanding in assisting member States in improving human settlements conditions and trends through an integrated programme covering research, policy advice, training and technical cooperation. This evolution drew its roots from the increasing gap between the challenges posed by poverty and urbanization and the resources of member States. Gradually, the Centre took on the additional role of promoting enabling strategies and partnerships, to better assist member States in dealing with their human settlements challenges.

12. The Centre is the focal point within the United Nations for the monitoring and implementation of the Habitat Agenda and for the global exchange of information on human settlements. Under the guidance of the Commission on Human Settlements, it has launched two global campaigns concerning secure tenure and urban governance, as strategic points of entry for the effective implementation of the Habitat Agenda.

13. The Centre successfully organized a special session of the General Assembly devoted to the five-year review of the implementation of the Habitat Agenda adopted in Istanbul in 1996. At the special session, 100 national reports from both developed and developing countries were presented, outlining accomplishments and difficulties encountered in

implementing the Habitat Agenda. In addition, tangible and practical experiences from all over the world in implementing clusters of action of the Istanbul Global Plan of Action[8] were discussed through the innovative mechanism of the "Thematic Committee". Consideration could be given to institutionalizing the process adopted for the special session, mainly through periodical country reports, with technical and financial assistance whenever required.

14. The Centre has been benefiting from the growing financial and political support of member States as a consequence of the revitalization process that followed Habitat II in Istanbul and the successful outcome of the first five-year period of implementation of the Habitat Agenda.

15. A rapidly changing world presents opportunities and risks, where the assumptions of previous decades are being challenged every day, and where the need for dialogue, cooperation and partnership has become an imperative for the United Nations and for the communities it serves. It is also a world of rising expectations, where the daunting challenge of accelerated urban growth, accompanied by the urbanization of poverty, needs to be addressed. The United Nations Millennium Declaration[9] goal of improving the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by the year 2020 (see para. 19 of the Declaration), which is central to the Habitat Agenda adopted in Istanbul five years ago, defines the central challenge of a new role for the Centre and the whole United Nations family. It is in this context that options for strengthening the functions and status of the Centre should be considered.

16. The Centre's function could be further strengthened by upgrading the Centre's own capacity to offer technical assistance in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda, and by strengthening its normative and operational activities, particularly in the areas of training and capacity-building, knowledge-building and research, urban economic analysis and housing finance.

17. As the secretariat for the Commission on Human Settlements, the Centre has successfully organized 18 sessions of the Commission, and worked actively with Commission members on the establishment of a permanent inter-sessional body, the Committee of Permanent Representatives, which was recently endorsed by the Economic and Social Council. In addition to its responsibilities for the preparation of timely documentation and ensuring support for the deliberations of the Commission, the Centre could also play a more forward-looking role, as a catalytic centre of excellence in addressing new challenges and promoting new partnerships.

18. The Centre assists the Secretary-General in enhancing policy coherence and coordination of human settlement programmes planned and carried out by the United Nations system. One example of progress in this area has been the open-ended negotiation process pioneered by the Centre for the Habitat Agenda, with the participation of many United Nations agencies. However, more work could be done in order to ensure even greater coherence and collaboration in the areas covered by the Habitat Agenda.

19. At present, the Centre participates in meetings of the two main Committees recently established by the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC); the Executive Director of the Centre is invited to meetings of ACC for discussions of items of direct concern to it. The Centre's function could be strengthened by identifying and increasing synergies in policy and operational activities related to shelter and sustainable human settlements in an urbanizing world. The General Assembly, in resolution 53/242 of 28 July 1999, supported my proposal for the establishment of an Environmental Management Group (EMG) in order to enhance inter-agency coordination in the field of environment and human settlements. Within the framework of the EMG, issue-specific working groups have been established to address cross-cutting issues of common concern to organizations of the United Nations system. The proposed Habitat task manager system would therefore be well placed in this framework and function as a working group on the implementation of the Habitat Agenda, headed by the Centre. Additional efforts can also be made to forge to partnership initiatives with organizations of the United Nations system (such as the Cities Alliance in cooperation with the World Bank).

20. The Centre also has responsibilities of promoting coordination and partnership with local authorities and major groups of civil society. During the past six years, the Centre has made considerable progress in this area. Habitat II itself was a partners' conference, laying central emphasis on the role of cities and civil society. Among other initiatives was the creation of the World Associations of Cities and Local Authorities Coordination (WACLAC). The Istanbul conference

also offered a forum for the coming together of additional Habitat Agenda partners (Global Parliamentarians on Habitat, Youth for Habitat, women's caucuses, the business sector, professionals and researchers, trade unions, and non-governmental organizations).

21. In 1999, the Commission on Human Settlements established the Advisory Committee of Local Authorities[10] to offer advice and support to the Centre in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda and to promote the mainstreaming of cities, local authorities and their associations in the work of the United Nations. In June 2001, 60 mayors from all over the world and the presidents of the world associations of cities renewed to the President of the General Assembly and to the Secretary-General their commitment to the Habitat Agenda and pledged their support to the implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration. A very significant follow-up to this meeting has been the offer of specialized services to strengthen local institution-building in post-conflict countries.

22. The Centre would be expected to facilitate contacts and cooperation, including information exchange and policy support, to Habitat Agenda partners at the international, national and local levels. It can also promote the recognition of cities and local authorities and their world associations as partners of the United Nations in the quest for a safer and better world and enhance the dialogue among Governments at all levels and Habitat Agenda partners on all issues related to effective decentralization and the strengthening of local authorities, as mandated by the Commission.

23. Other measures could include support to non-governmental organizations in their advocacy work and, in particular, the Habitat International Coalition; strengthening operational partnerships with selected civil society coalitions such as the International Slum Dwellers' Federation; and identifying new strategies for the involvement of the private sector in public-private partnerships for slum upgrading, social housing and sustainable human settlements development.

24. One of the Centre's central functions is to provide advisory services and implement human settlements programmes at the request of member States. This function has been performed over a period of 20 years through projects and programmes, including the Urban Management Programme, the Disaster Management Programme, and the Cities Alliance, and continues to be the most visible and direct evidence of the Centre's contribution to development. It is, however, severely limited by the decreasing flow of resources available for technical cooperation and characterized by an increasing proportion of tied contributions. The presence of the Centre at the country level is also limited owing to staffing constraints.

25. Efforts should therefore be made to enhance the Centre's role in the field; to diversify sources of financing for technical cooperation projects and programmes; and to identify new avenues for inter-agency collaboration. One specific option would be the revitalization, through partnerships with international development banks and other finance institutions, of the United Nations Habitat and Human Settlements Foundation, originally created as a revolving fund to support, inter alia, selected shelter programmes in the developing countries and the strengthening of housing finance institutions.

26. Other suggested steps could include the promotion and support of new forms of technical cooperation, including city-to-city cooperation; the mobilization of the considerable know-how and good will of cities, local authorities and their associations in institution-building at the local level, both for capacity-building and for special support to countries and cities in post-conflict situations; the operational mainstreaming of the experience documented by the Centre's Best Practices and Local Leadership Programme facility; and the further strengthening of the Centre's involvement in the work of the United Nations Development Group in order to identify synergies and opportunities for mutual support.

27. At the regional level, the strengthening of the Centre's regional offices could enhance the provision of improved technical cooperation services to Governments and local authorities and ensure the regionalization of the global campaigns.

28. The Centre's present denomination is essentially one inherited from its progenitor, the Centre for Housing, Building and Planning. Through the years, the Centre has acquired the traits of a full programme in discharging its role and functions. It has a broad mandate established by the General Assembly and reconfirmed by a major United Nations conference including research, capacity-building, information dissemination and technical cooperation. It is the focal

point for the implementation of the plan of action of a major United Nations conference.

29. The Centre currently undertakes a broad spectrum of operational activities, ranging from institutional and legal reform and capacity-building to post-disaster and post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction. It has a worldwide advocacy role in the eradication of urban poverty through the promotion of shelter and secure tenure for all and participatory urban governance. The Centre also has a global reach with operational and normative functions discharged by regional offices in each developing region backstopping, at present, 445 projects in 78 countries.

30. The Centre discharges secretariat functions to a major intergovernmental body. Its organizational structure disaggregates the two main components of its work programme — corresponding to the Habitat Agenda goals of adequate shelter for all and sustainable human settlements development in an urbanizing world — in sectoral components integrating all of the Centre's mandated functions. When it was first established, the Centre had 61 Professional posts and a total budget of $22.8 million. For 2002-2003, it is expected to have a total of 106 Professional posts and a budget of $123.7 million, with 10 per cent to be allocated from the regular budget of the United Nations. In the context of the ongoing process of the revitalization of the Centre, and subject to sustained improvements in funding, the Commission at its recent eighteenth session authorized the increase in the number of established United Nations Habitat and Human Settlements Foundation posts from 13 to 31, effectively raising the staffing level of the Centre to 131 Professional posts.

31. In recognition of its increased functions and responsibilities, one option for consideration may be to change the Centre's name from "United Nations Centre for Human Settlements" to "United Nations Human Settlements Programme". There would be a benefit in giving higher visibility to human settlements issues, with particular reference to the United Nations Millennium Declaration goal of improving the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by the year 2020. New and better opportunities could be opened for resource mobilization; for a stronger presence of the Centre in the field; and for a more productive and effective collaboration with agencies, programmes and funds and country teams. The change would not have any budgetary implications. It may have a salutary effect on the status of the United Nations presence in Nairobi.

32. The ideas and options discussed in this report are intended to facilitate the General Assembly's consideration of ways of further strengthening the work of the Commission on Human Settlements and of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat). The Assembly may also wish to seek the views of the Economic and Social Council on the various issues involved, with the overall objective of ensuring the effective implementation of the Habitat Agenda in the years ahead.

Notes

[1] General Assembly resolutions 51/177 of 16 December 1996 and 53/242 of 28 July 1999, the agreed conclusions of the coordination segment of the Economic and Social Council of 2000 (see *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 3* (A/55/3/Rev.1), chap. V), and paras. 224 and 229 of the Habitat Agenda.

[2] *Report of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), Istanbul, 3-14 June 1996* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.97.IV.6), chap. I, resolution 1, annex II.

[3] *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992*, vol. I, *Resolutions Adopted by the Conference* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigendum); resolution 1, annex II.

[4] See *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-sixth Session, Supplement No. 8* (A/56/8), annex I, sect. A.

[5] Ibid., sect. B.

[6] Until 18 October 2000, when the United Nations Forum on Forests was established by Economic and Social Council resolution 2000/35, the Commission on Human Settlements had been the largest subsidiary body of the Council.

[7] See ST/SGB/107/Rev.6 of 25 March 1991, para. 2 (d).

[8] *Report of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), Istanbul, 3-14 June 1996*, (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.97.IV.6), chap. I, resolution 1, annex II, chap. IV.

[9] See General Assembly resolution 55/2 of 8 September 2000.

[10] See *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 8* (A/54/8), annex I, sect. A.2, resolution 17/18 (of 14 May 1999).